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THE IDENTITY OF THE CHILD IN VIRGIL'S *POLLIO*: AN AFTERWORD

BY J. E. CHURCH, JR.

Under the title *The Identity of the Child in Virgil's Pollio*, which appeared in a recent number of the *University of Nevada Studies* (I, No. 2), the writer presented evidence to show that the Romans did not consider it contrary to their canon of taste to "prophecy" the sex of an unborn child.

Additional evidence, since gathered, not only supports the conclusion then reached but even indicates a deeply rooted tendency on the part of the Romans to discuss things prenatal.

The more important part of this evidence is furnished by Valerius Flaccus. In his *Argonautica*, Jason, while on his voyage to Colchis, tarries at Lemnos in wedlock with Hypsipyle, the youthful queen of a female people. The narrative in large essentials agrees with that of Apollonius Rhodius. But in the scene of parting, inspired evidently by the narrative of Apollonius, Valerius has deviated from his model so radically as to indicate a complete divergence of feeling.

This scene and the variations in its presentation can be indicated best by quoting from the authors themselves. Reference is made by both to an unborn child, but here the similarity ends.

The narrative of Apollonius is naturally Greek in spirit, but the manner of reference to the possible sex of the child is also modern:

Argonaut. A, 886-909:

ὥς δὲ καὶ Ὑψιπύλῃ ἡρήσατο χεῖρας ἐλούσα
Αἰσονίδεω, τὰ δέ οἱ ῥέε δάκρυα χήτει ἰόντος·
· · · · ·
μνώεο μὴν ἀπεών περ ὁμῶς καὶ νόστιμος ἦδη
Ὑψιπύλης· λίπε δ' ἡμῖν ἔπος, τό κεν ἐξανύσαιμι
πρόφρων, ἣν ἄρα δὴ με θεοὶ δώωσι τεκέσθαι.
Τὴν δ' αὖτ' Αἷσσονος νῆδος ἀγαιόμενος προσέειπεν·
'Ὑψιπύλῃ, τὰ μὲν οὕτω ἐναίσιμα πάντα γένοιτο
ἐκ μακάρων· τὴν γ' δ' ἐμέθεν περὶ θυμὸν ἀρείω

ἴσχαν', ἐπεὶ πάτρην μοι ἄλκις Πελῖας ἔκητι
 ναιετάειν· μούνον με θεοὶ λύσειαν ἀέθλων.
 εἰ δ' οὗ μοι πέπρωται ἐς Ἑλλάδα γαῖαν ἰκέσθαι
 τηλοῦ ἀναπλώνοντι, σὺ δ' ἄρσενά παῖδα τέκῃαι,
 πέμπε μιν ἡβήσαντα Πελασγίδος ἔνδον Ἴωλκοῦ
 πατρί τ' ἐμῷ καὶ μητρὶ δῖης ἄκος, ἣν ἄρα τοῖσγε
 τέτμη' ἔτι ζῶοντας, ἵν' ἀνδρα τοῖο ἀνακτος
 σφοῖσιν πορσύνωνται ἐφέστιοι ἐν μεγάροισιν.'

Delicacy of statement on the part of Hypsipyle regarding the possible birth of a child (898) and Jason's preference for a son (904 ff.) are the features of the passage.

However, in the version of Valerius the sex of the unborn child is assumed despite the natural uncertainty that pervades the narrative of Apollonius; for the Roman author represents Hypsipyle as pleading for the return of Jason in behalf of their unborn son, a second Jason:

Argonaut. ii, 422-25:

'I, memor, i, terrae, quae vos amplexa quieto
 prima sinu; refer et domitis a Colchidos oris
 vela per hunc utero quem linquis Iasona nostro.'
 Sic ait, Haemonii labens in colla mariti.

Since Valerius was a contemporary of Martial, the latter is thereby cleared of the charge that he was "audax omnia perpeti" in writing his epigram to Domitian on an expected royal heir, for Valerius would scarcely have employed sex-propheying even in a mythological poem, if general sentiment had been strongly opposed to such usage. Certainly no affront on the part of Martial was intended and it is probable that none was felt by Domitian.

Further evidence is furnished by Ovid, a contemporary, approximately, of Virgil himself. In the *Aeneid* (iv, 327-30) Virgil represents Dido as childless and regretful that she has borne no little Aeneas to recall his father's visage. But in the *Heroides* Ovid raises the story of the desertion of Dido to higher pathos by representing Dido as appealing to Aeneas to remain in behalf of her possible motherhood and the little unborn brother of Iulus:

vii, Dido Aeneae, 133-38:

Forsitan et gravidam Didon, scelerate, relinquas,
parsque tui lateat corpore clausa meo.
Accedet fatis matris miserabilis infans
et nondum nati funeris auctor eris,
cumque parente sua frater morietur Iuli,
poenaeque conexos auferet una duos. . . .

The sentiment of her plea resembles that of Hypsipyle's parting injunction to Jason as portrayed by Valerius.

The word *forsitan* (133) applies only to Dido's motherhood. Regarding the sex of the child, if born, no doubt (135-38) whatever is expressed by the poet.

In all of the evidence found thus far, a son, not a daughter, was the subject of prophecy. Does this mean that only sons were prophesied or that in the literary evidence extant only males and not females would suit the dramatic requirements in each instance? In the poems saluting royal heirs, such as the *Pollio*, and Martial's epigram, only male children could satisfy the political requirements; and in lyric as well as in epic poetry the human tendency to favor the male rather than the female would be strongly manifested.¹ But if we may draw an analogy from modern usage, despite the leading place that the male child held in the esteem of the Roman parents—

Est tibi sitque, precor, natus, qui mollibus annis
in patrias artes erudiendus erat²—

the hope that the unborn babe might be a girl to refine the ruggedness of the boys must have found utterance in many a household. Yet such utterance would rarely find a place in verse.³ Since, therefore, the exigencies of the situation—literary or political or personal—caused the writer to prophesy the male sex in every instance recorded, this so-called prophesying was practically a stereotyped form, void of all the hazard associated with the genuine act.

¹ For this reason it is safe to assume that the word *quantum* employed in the epitaph by Trebius Basileus to his deceased wife (quoted in the original paper) is a substantive rather than an adverb and in gender masculine, not common, and refers to a fourth son rather than to a fourth child. This view is still further confirmed by Apuleius' treatment of the *Cupid and Psyche* myth (see pp. 82 ff.).

² *Heroides* i, Penelope Ulix, 111-12.

³ The father's love for his daughter and his ambition to possess a son to perpetuate

That, however, Valerius did not prophesy twins in accordance with the variant tradition adopted by Ovid (*Heroides* vi, Hypsipyle Iasoni, 119 ff.) and by Statius (*Thebaid* v, 608, 712 ff.) possibly shows the bounds which the poet might not overstep without exposing himself to the charge of lacking a sense of humor even by his fellow Romans. To prophesy one male child was evidently permissible, but to predict the unusual twins would invite derision.

Valerius may, however, have preferred the older tradition of one son, as may also Apollonius, irrespective of the constraint imposed by the nature of his narrative. Be this as it may, Ovid chose the variant tradition of twin offspring, but he postponed until after the birth the announcement of its dual nature with evident heightening of the power of Hypsipyle's appeal and increase in the dramatic effectiveness of the poem. Whether he was primarily constrained to abandon his previous method of prophesying the nature of the offspring by his sense of its absurdity or by his innate feeling for dramatic adaptation is uncertain.

Hypsipyle's appeal is represented as being made after news has reached her of Jason's safe return to Thessaly and evident abandonment of herself. She recalls the scene of their parting at Lemnos and of his promise to her. In this parting scene he, not she, refers to the coming offspring, but his thought is couched in general terms:

Heroides vi, Hypsipyle Iasoni, 60-62—

‘Vir tuus hinc abeo, vir tibi semper ero;
quod tamen e nobis gravida celatur in alvo,
vivat, et eiusdem simul uterque parens!’

The great good fortune of bearing twins is reserved for the mother to offer Jason as additional dower to regain his favor:

his name appear side by side in the following epitaph. The widow addresses the dead, and the dead replies.

Bücheler, *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* 92, 4 ff.:

Moschis tua te salutat et D[iodorus tuus
et blanda dulcis pupa, delictum tuum
et quem tu tuis manibus nuper sustuleras puer.
‘Have casta coniunx et m[ei] conserva memoriam,
have mi Diodore amice frat[er]que et parens,
have pupa blanda, anima m[ea], tuque have puer
quem nuper pararam ut hab[erem] heredem nominis.’

vss. 119-22—

Nunc etiam peperī: gratare ambobus, Iason!
 Dulce mihi gravidæ fecerat auctor onus.
 Felix in numero quoque sum prolemque gemellam
 pignora Lucina bina favente dedi.

And for her rival, Medea, Hypsipyle also wishes sons—as many as she herself has borne—that Medea's woe, which she now pronounces against her, may resemble her own:

vss. 155-56—

utque ego destituor coniunx materque duorum,
 a totidem natis orba sit illa viro.

The attainment of this climax may have allured Ovid to choose the tradition which he has handled so skilfully. In the pseudo-prophecy of two sons for Medea—the traditional number—appears again the easy attitude of the Romans toward the prediction of future offspring.

From the above evidence and that presented in the original paper is derived the second fact, which bears upon the date of the publication of the *Pollio*, viz., that the leading authors of Rome freely wrote of unborn sons, not alone in the ideal situations of epic poetry but in national and society verse. Catullus, Virgil, Ovid, Martial, Valerius Flaccus, and probably Trebius Basileus represent a period of possibly two centuries during which this tendency remained unchanged. The long continuance of this tendency—offensive though the tendency be to Anglo-Saxon taste—draws one inevitably to the conclusion that this reference to unborn children was merely the out-cropping into literature of a usage which had its foundation in the common people.

The existence of such a folk usage is verified and its characteristics are illustrated in Apuleius' romance of *Cupid and Psyche*, which has been suggested by Professor E. W. Martin as furnishing a striking parallel to the *Pollio* itself. The tale is Greek, but some of its features are Roman, as is likewise the language in which it is expressed. In this tale the hopes of parents are embodied in the ideals of Cupid and Psyche, and the congratulations of kinsmen in the pretended adulation of Psyche's sisters.

Cupid plans and Psyche wonders in her heart:

Metamorphoses v, 11: Nam et familiam nostram propagabimus, et hic adhuc infantilis uterus gestat nobis infantem alium, si texeris nostra secreta silentio, divinum, si profanaveris, mortalem.

That this child is regarded as a son seems evident from Psyche's expressed hope that it may resemble its father: v, 13—"sic in hoc saltem parvulo cognoscam faciem tuam . . .",¹ and particularly from the flattery of the sisters that two such beautiful parents must needs produce a Cupid, as shown in the passage quoted below. Family pride and interest are realistically portrayed:

v, 14: Psyche, non ita ut pridem parvula, et ipsa iam mater es. Quantum, putas, boni nobis in ista geris perula; quantis gaudiis totam domum nostram hilarabis? O nos beatas, quas infantis aurei nutrimenta laetabunt! qui si parentum, ut oportet, pulchritudini responderit, prorsus Cupido nascetur.

But notwithstanding the fond hopes of the parents, in the fulness of time there was born to Cupid and Psyche, not the son desired, but a daughter, whom, says Apuleius, people call Voluptas:

vi, 24: et nascitur illis maturo partu filia, quam Voluptatem nominamus.

The unexpected conclusion of the romance is probably due to the fact that the author was expanding an earlier myth in which the Roman deity Voluptas² was associated as daughter with the Greek

¹ On this point see also Catullus' *Epithalamium of Vinia and Manlius*—

Sit suo similis patri
Manlio et facile inscieis
noscitur ab omnibus
et pudicitiam suae
matris indicet ore.

—lxi, 217-21—

in which the wish is expressed that the child may be his father's counterpart and bear in his face his mother's purity.

Though such evidence is not conclusive, for facial resemblance is not necessarily confined to similar sexes, nor did the Romans so judge (see Büch. *Carm. Lat. Epigr.* 42, v. 1: "Mulier ferebat filium similem sui," and Apuleius' reference to inherited beauty, *Met.* v. 14, quoted below) yet the reference to the unborn child as a Cupid removes any doubt on the subject, for Cupids have ever been regarded as males from the Alexandrian period, when the Cupid *motif* attained its prime, until the present day—Chaucer *House of Fame* I, 137:

Hir dowves, and daun Cupido,
Hir blynde sone

Dickens *Dombey and Son* V: "Is he not a Cupid, Sir?"

The term seems never to have represented a type of beauty regardless of sex, as do apparently the epithets "cherub" and "angel."

² Cicero, *De Nat. Deor.* ii. 23: Cupidinis et Voluptatis et Lubentinae Veneris vocabula consecrata sunt. . . .

divinities Cupid and Psyche, and felt himself constrained to accept the tradition without essential variation. However, the ambition to possess a son, which forms one of the elements of human interest in the romance, is the author's own,¹ and to judge from the naïveté with which he inserts it, no incongruity was felt to exist in the combination.

The persistence of this folk usage into modern times has been verified by Professor S. B. Doten, who recalls a conversation with Luigi della Piazza, formerly an Italian peasant, in which American prudery was the subject of criticism by the latter. He declared that not only was the promise of a child followed by congratulations to the mother on the part of her acquaintances, both male and female, but that accompanying the congratulations was the hope expressed that the child would be a boy.

It seems safe, therefore, to assume that the *Pollio* was in full harmony with the national spirit; that its anticipation was the nation's anticipation, its preference for a male child the nation's preference, and its prediction the nation's prediction also; and that, therefore, the collapse of the hopes voiced in the *Pollio* brought the nation a sense of disappointment rather than a sense of the ludicrous at the poet's failure. In short, the shock caused the Romans was no greater than that recently caused their lineal descendants, the Italians, who had set their hearts upon having a *bambino* as heir apparent to their throne, but whose hopes were dashed by the announcement that their keenly anticipated prince was a princess. Since Virgil wrote the *Pollio* before the birth of Julia, I can see no reason why he should have withheld the publication of the poem until the birth and then finally, when the memory of the event had faded, have brought it forth quietly as an expression of the ideal. It seems rather to have been a salutatory poem quite in keeping with the times.

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¹No other child than Voluptas is mentioned in literature, nor probably does any appear in art. The representation of Psyche holding a small Eros child like a baby to her bosom and apparently nursing it (Brit. Mus., *Cat.* No. 825; Furtwängler, *Ant. Gem.* Bd. III, 281) is probably a fanciful variation of the Cupid and Psyche motif. At least, regarding a similar representation (in the Kestner Collection at Hannover, Furtwängler, *Taf.* XLII, 36) of Psyche holding a sleeping Eros child to her bosom no question can be raised, since the quiver and bow are hanging from a tree near by.